

How Can Christians Rejoice in Times of Troubles?



Thrust statement: Christians rejoice because of their position in Christ Jesus.

Scripture reading: [Philippians 3:3; 4:4](#)

As one contemplates the tragedies that frequently occur in the lives of individuals, one can understand sadness that often devastates one's ability to rejoice. Sickness frequently ravages one's outlook concerning one's spiritual well being. A catastrophic illness can plunge one into a state of depression that is difficult to overcome. The death of one's loved one often sends one over the edge—even to the point of suicide. When one experiences marital problems, it is not uncommon for individuals to take their own lives. Financial ruin often leads to suicide. How can one rejoice in the face of such seemingly insurmountable heartbreaks in life?

Troubles are a part of life. No one is exempt. Jesus, in His conversation with Mary over the death of her brother, Lazarus, was moved with compassion as he witnessed the weeping of Mary and the Jews. John expresses the emotional trauma that Jesus experienced as He saw the sadness in Mary and the Jews: "Jesus wept" ([John 11:35](#)). Even though Martha, Mary, and Lazarus were close personal friends of Jesus, this fact, in and of itself, did not spare them from the normal experiences of day-to-day life. One cannot read about the tension in Job's life when he lost it all—children, live stock, and health—without being impressed with his firmness of faithfulness toward God.

Just how are Christians to react in the face of disturbances in one's daily routine? For an answer to this question, Paul's Philippian letter (ca. 61 BCE) is called forth to illustrate in a very concrete way how Christians should view difficulties in their lives. Paul called upon the Philippians to rejoice: "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you" ([Philippians 3:1](#)).^[1] Does this sound strange? If one is confined to

prison, as Paul was at the time of writing this epistle, one wonders how Paul could tell the Philippians to “rejoice in the Lord.” It is worthy of notice that this confinement was not the same as his last confinement (Mamertine dungeon) while waiting for his execution in Rome (**2 Timothy**). This time, while in Rome, Paul was allowed his own house in Rome (**Acts 28:14-31**).

Again, in the fourth chapter, Paul calls upon the Philippians to rejoice: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (**4:4**). Paul wrote this letter to teach the Philippians how to “rejoice in the Lord.” But even before Paul issues these imperatives, he relates his own predicament as events in which God is still glorified. Just how did Paul envision his own incarceration? Well, listen to Paul as he sets the stage for his imperatives—“rejoice” (caivrete, cairete, “rejoice, be glad”):

¹² Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. ¹³ As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴ Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly (**Philippians 1:12-14**).

For Paul, he reveled in the fact that his incarceration served to advance the Gospel of Christ. But, in addition, there was another side benefit—brothers were encouraged to speak God’s Word “more courageously and fearlessly.” Paul did not allow misfortune to deter him in his objective of proclaiming the good news of God. He did not say, “woe is me,” but rather, he states emphatically his outlook on life, in spite of persecution: “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (**1:21**). Not only did Paul suffer from those outside the body of Christ, but he also endured verbal abuse from others who preached Christ. Yet, regardless of the allegations made against him, he could still rejoice in the preaching of Jesus—even if from bad motives. Paul writes:

¹⁵ It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶ The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸ But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice (**1:15-18**).

There is a tendency, often times among believers, of jealousy and envy. One must constantly be on guard against the works of the flesh. Also, it is not uncommon for Christians to favor one brother to the exclusion of another. One of the most frequent complaints that individuals make is in regard to clicks within the body of Christ. This is not something new; it is old. Paul deals with this mentality in the Corinthian church:

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. ¹¹ My brothers, some

from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. ¹² What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."

¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? (**1 Corinthians 1:10-13**)

Today, Christians still witness similar concerns within the body of Christ. Do we agree with one another in order to be "united in mind and thought" concerning the body of Christ? Do we quarrel with one another? Do we despise one another? Do we love one another as Christ loves us? The Christians in Corinth were not the only ones that suffered from the works of the flesh. For example, in the Philippian letter, Paul calls attention to two sisters who are at one another's throats. He says,

² I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. ³ Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life (**Philippians 4:2-3**).

What is the antidote for such behavior? For Paul, it is the incarnation—God becoming flesh. Disunity threatened the Christians at Philippi. This is still true today in every body of believers. It is not uncommon for Christians to war with one another. This war of words may be over personalities or doctrines. Whenever individuals are in earnest about their beliefs, those viewpoints become the criteria by which faithfulness to God is judged. The greater their passion for a particular doctrine, the greater danger there is for conflict. In order to safe guard the fellowship of God, Paul calls attention to self-denial on the part of each individual. There must exist within every person a sense of unworthiness. Every Christian should aim, not for ambition, but rather for self-obliteration. One should do good deeds, not that men may glorify himself/herself, but that God may be glorified. Jesus expresses it this way:

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven (**Matthew 5:14-16**).

Again, what is Paul's antidote to division? Listen to Paul as he reflects upon the incarnation as the moving force for acceptance of other believers:

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. ⁴ Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with

God something to be grasped,⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (**Philippians 2:1-11**).

God's remedy for unhappiness is Jesus. God's remedy for discord is Jesus. God's solution for inward peace—peace that passes all understanding—is Jesus. Before you can experience this joy that Paul speaks of, one must come to a consciousness that he/she stands in need of a righteousness that is outside of one's own actions. This righteousness is an alien righteousness. One must come to the cross to receive the righteousness that belongs to God. The joy that Paul speaks of in the Philippians letter is a joy that is beyond circumstances in life. Joy is an inner quality of life that delights in the Law of God. This joy is inward in the Holy Spirit. This joy springs up within every individual in a way that is totally unrelated to harsh conditions or state of affairs in everyday life. What is the kingdom of God about? Listen to Paul as he shouts, as it were: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,"¹⁸ because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men" (**Romans 14:17-18**).

Do you want to experience this "joy in the Holy Spirit"? If you have tasted that the Lord is gracious, then you must live a pure life. When one lives in sin, this keeps one from the source of joy, which is God. In order for one to experience true joy, the believer must submit his/her life to Him. How does one experience peace in the Holy Spirit? Again, Paul gives the remedy:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (**Philippians 4:4-6**).

Where is peace and joy? It is in Christ Jesus. It is not in one's wealth or fame. It is not in one's birth? Do you want that peace that transcends all understanding? If so, then you must turn to Jesus. In the third chapter of Philippians, immediately following his call for joy, Paul reflects upon doctrine—the doctrine of justification by faith. In this doctrine that produces joy—the righteousness that comes by faith—one quickly discovers that the good news of God makes it all worthwhile, whatever your lot in life. Paul briefly gives an impressive family background before denouncing all as futile in comparison to knowing Christ:

² Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. ³ For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit

of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless (**Philippians 3:2-6**).

This is an imposing catalog; yet, for Paul, he willingly renounces it all for the privilege of “knowing Christ.” One should listen to Paul as he seeks to capture his most inward feelings about his gratitude for God’s salvation:

⁷ But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. (**3:7-11**).

Is it any wonder that Paul echoes the resounding “rejoice in the Lord”? True rejoicing is a safe guard for one’s sanity. Every Christian faces the trials and tribulations of everyday life. Jesus warns His disciples about impending stumbling blocks. Yet, in spite of troubles, Jesus says,

³² But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me. ³³ I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world (**John 16:32-33**).

Paul knew that in Jesus he had peace in spite of outward circumstances in life. By 55 CE, Paul had experienced hardships and physical abuse that would have caused many to throw up their hands in disgust, but not Paul. Just a few years earlier than his Philippian letter written about 61 CE, Paul briefly gives a portrait of his birth and religious heritage followed by a description of suffering almost beyond description:

¹⁶ I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then receive me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting. ¹⁷ In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool. ¹⁸ Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast. ¹⁹ You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise! ²⁰ In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face. ²¹ To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that! What anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. ²² Are they Hebrews? So am

I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I.
²³ Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. ²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? ³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. ³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. ³² In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. ³³ But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands (**2 Corinthians 11:16-33**).

Rejoicing in the Lord is one of the greatest safeguards against dangers that confronts all Christians—even within one's own local fellowship of believers. Sometimes believers can be cruel and extremely hurtful—thinking they are being true to the faith, but in reality, they are just upholding long standing traditions of orthodoxy. In conclusion, may God help every believer to remember the words of the author of Hebrews:

⁵ Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." ⁶ So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" (**Hebrews 13:5-6**).

Where is true rejoicing? It is in Jesus, regardless of circumstances in life. Every Christian should always be conscious that there is not always a correlation between righteousness and material blessings. One only needs to reflect upon righteous Job and the calamities that befell him to realize that righteous acts and natural goods do not always follow. But, the one thing that is obvious in Job's life is this: Faith always presses on beyond the material rewards. It is also in this regard that Habakkuk can sing his magnificent song of faith:

¹⁷ Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, ¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior (**Habakkuk 3:17-18**).

[\[1\]](#) All Scripture citations are from *The New International Version*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House) 1984, unless stated otherwise.